

# Bureaucratic Erasures:

## The Archive as a Site of Violence in Postcolonial India

### I. Introduction

This research began with a simple question: how does a state remember, and what does it choose to forget? At first, the focus was on identifying patterns in the bureaucratic organization of postcolonial Indian archives. The expectation was to find the usual tensions between transparency and red tape, or between truth and state narrative. But the findings were more unsettling. As policy documents, gazettes, court records, and government circulars were examined more closely, it became increasingly evident that the archive was not simply a repository; it was a weapon (Stoler, 2009). Not metaphorically, but materially. It could criminalize, erase, obscure, and sanction. It could assign deviance or erase suffering. It could make a person, or an entire community, disappear.

Archives are typically imagined as places of preservation. They are treated as neutral, institutional storehouses of memory. Scholars, journalists, and policymakers often turn to them seeking a stable record of the past. The archive, in this dominant framing, is a site of access, transparency, and historical continuity. But this assumption collapses under scrutiny (Derrida, 1996; Stoler, 2009). Archives are not passive. They are constructed, curated, and constantly revised. They reflect the biases of those who built them and serve the purposes of those who control them. They are governed by inclusion and exclusion, by what is considered worth preserving and what is not.

25           In India, these tensions are intensified by the country's colonial legacy. When  
26 independence arrived in 1947, the administrative infrastructure of the British Raj did not  
27 vanish; it was inherited. The newly sovereign state retained much of the colonial logic of  
28 documentation, surveillance, and classification (Gupta, 2012). In fact, it often doubled down.  
29 The language changed from "civilizing mission" to "development," but the bureaucratic  
30 machinery remained familiar. The result was that the postcolonial archive did not cleanse itself  
31 of imperial power. It absorbed it, often uncritically.

32           This paper argues that in postcolonial India, the archive has not merely preserved state  
33 memory; it has actively enacted violence through bureaucratic erasure. That violence is not  
34 spectacular, it is structural. It operates through the slow, quiet, and accumulative power of  
35 paper. Through selective documentation, distortion, and silence, the archive marginalizes entire  
36 communities. Nomadic tribes become "habitual offenders," Partition refugees are reduced to  
37 statistical entries, and caste atrocities are reworded as "local disturbances." The violence is in  
38 the framing, in the form, in the omission (Foucault, 1977; Gupta, 2012).

39           Drawing on state documents, legal records, and critical theory, the archive is framed  
40 not as a passive storehouse but as an active site of epistemic and political control. It becomes  
41 a space where power is both stored and exercised (Foucault, 1977; Stoler, 2009). This analysis  
42 focuses on three case studies: the afterlife of the Criminal Tribes Act, the bureaucratization of  
43 Partition trauma, and the legal erasure of caste atrocities. Each case reveals how archival  
44 practices shape not only what is remembered, but how it is remembered—and, crucially, who  
45 is remembered.

46           This project remains conscious of the researcher's relationship to the archive.  
47 Institutional access and the privilege of academic inquiry allow certain files to be opened that  
48 remain closed to others (Burton, 2005). Yet this access also implies complicity in the very

49 systems under critique. Archival documents speak about people but rarely with them. Visibility  
50 is granted to some only because others have been systematically denied it. That tension is not  
51 merely intellectual; it is ethical. It influences which questions are asked, which silences are  
52 noticed, and which conclusions demand caution (Das, 2007).

53 Ultimately, this paper seeks to shift how archives are understood—not as dusty  
54 repositories of objective truth, but as dynamic, contested, and often violent terrains. In doing  
55 so, it aims to contribute to a growing body of work that reconsiders how power lives on—not  
56 only in laws or borders, but in the quiet authority of bureaucratic memory (Derrida, 1996;  
57 Gupta, 2012).

## 58 **II. Literature Review**

59  
60 To understand the archive as a site of violence, this analysis turns first to foundational  
61 archive theory. Michel Foucault's concept of knowledge-power is instrumental in reframing  
62 bureaucratic documents not as reflections of truth, but as instruments that produce truth within  
63 systems of power (Foucault, 1977). His idea that knowledge is both a product and a mechanism  
64 of power opens up a new reading of the Indian archive. In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault  
65 describes how institutions classify and discipline through subtle practices (Foucault, 1977).  
66 Bureaucracies do not just store information—they enforce norms through classification. In the  
67 context of state documents, this means that forms, registers, and classifications are not neutral;  
68 they are mechanisms through which the state defines, polices, and reproduces social order  
69 (Foucault, 1972).

70 This becomes particularly salient when analyzing how particular communities,  
71 especially Dalits, denotified tribes, and Partition survivors, are described. Their presence in the  
72 archive is not a recognition, but a labeling, often tied to suspicion or deficiency (Stoler, 2009).

73 Foucault's analysis helps illuminate the mechanisms by which a document that appears  
74 objective, like a census record or a legal filing, participates in the state's broader disciplinary  
75 regimes (Foucault, 1977).

76 Jacques Derrida's *Archive Fever* adds another layer. Where Foucault is systemic,  
77 Derrida is more intimate, even neurotic. He writes about the archive not only as an institution,  
78 but as a site of compulsion—a place where states and scholars seek permanence in the face of  
79 decay (Derrida, 1996). His famous line, “There is no political power without control of the  
80 archive,” speaks directly to the logic of bureaucratic preservation (Derrida, 1996, p. 4). The  
81 desire to fix memory, to make it stable and recoverable, is itself a political act. The archive  
82 does not merely preserve; it imposes.

83 Derrida's focus on the “law of the archive”, that it is always governed by institutional  
84 authority, is especially clarifying. In the case of postcolonial India, this involves understanding  
85 how the independent state, while rhetorically divorced from its colonial predecessor, often  
86 carries forward the legal and bureaucratic frameworks of empire. The archive's legal authority  
87 becomes a way to render some claims visible and legitimate, while others remain absent,  
88 unfiled, or deliberately lost.

89 Ann Stoler's work serves as the hinge that connects continental theories to the  
90 postcolonial and specifically South Asian context. In *Along the Archival Grain*, Stoler insists  
91 on reading colonial archives not just for what they say, but for how they say it—their textures,  
92 repetitions, gaps, and bureaucratic obsessions. She argues that archives are not repositories of  
93 empire; they are technologies of rule (Stoler, 2009, p. 20). Her concept of “aphasia”—the  
94 inability of the archive to speak about certain forms of suffering, even as it meticulously  
95 documents them—proves particularly useful in examining records of caste violence or Partition

96 trauma. Such events are frequently recorded not through testimonies or confessions, but  
97 through administrative shorthand, legal evasions, and numeric abstraction.

98         Stoler’s methodological contributions also prompt a treatment of the archive as a space  
99 of affect and anxiety. Bureaucracies do not simply reflect ideology—they leak, stall, and double  
100 back on themselves. Her insights encourage attention to elements often dismissed as noise:  
101 contradictory memos, missing signatures, and crossed-out entries. These are not errors—they  
102 are part of the archive’s structural logic (Stoler, 2009).

103         Antoinette Burton extends this critique by foregrounding gender and absence. She asks:  
104 who gets archived, and under what terms? Her work on colonial women’s lives, and the absence  
105 of their voices in official records, highlights parallel silences in the Indian postcolonial archive  
106 (Burton, 2005). Women abducted during Partition, for example, are logged as “cases” or  
107 “recoveries,” but their own voices are systematically excluded. The archive renders them  
108 visible only through bureaucratic categories, not through testimony.

109         Burton also emphasizes that archives are not inevitable; they are constructed. Decisions  
110 about what to save, what to discard, and what to classify as sensitive are acts of political  
111 judgment. In this sense, the archive is not just shaped by history; it actively shapes history itself  
112 (Burton, 2005).

113         Turning to postcolonial memory studies, Veena Das offers a crucial conceptual lens. In  
114 *Life and Words*, she explores how violence continues in everyday life—not only as trauma but  
115 as a mode of living (Das, 2007). Bureaucratic erasure does not end with the file; it persists in  
116 the silences of survivors and in the ways, communities internalize their own invisibility. Her  
117 emphasis on the banal, the routine, and the ordinary resonates strongly with the ways  
118 documents reduce extraordinary suffering to checkboxes or incident codes.

119           Gyanendra Pandey's *Remembering Partition* is equally significant. Partition is not  
120 treated as a resolved historical event, but rather as a site of contested memory—a space where  
121 official history and lived experience are often in conflict (Pandey, 2001). Pandey's insistence  
122 on fragmentation, that the past cannot be told in full, nor should it be, is a necessary corrective  
123 to the archive's pretensions of completeness. Archival documents, under this lens, are not  
124 definitive accounts but partial, ideologically saturated texts that reflect more about the priorities  
125 of the state than the realities they purport to capture.

126           Akhil Gupta brings the discussion back to material practices. In *Red Tape*, Gupta  
127 explores how bureaucracy functions as a form of structural violence (Gupta, 2012). Ordinary  
128 procedures like filing delays, missing documents, rejected applications become life-altering for  
129 the poor and marginalized. His analysis provides a critical vocabulary for understanding “slow  
130 violence” in bureaucratic systems: not always spectacular, but nonetheless devastating. A  
131 misfiled form might lead to eviction; the absence of a caste identifier can prevent a hate crime  
132 from being prosecuted appropriately.

133           Arjun Appadurai, in his work on the right to research and vernacular cosmopolitanism,  
134 emphasizes the political dimensions of knowledge production. He poses a fundamental  
135 question: who has the right to document, to archive, to write history? His call for “deep  
136 democracy” in knowledge production resonates with ongoing efforts in India to foster  
137 community archiving, oral history projects, and counter-documentation (Appadurai, 2006). His  
138 insights emphasize that archival access is a form of privilege, and that democratizing  
139 knowledge means not just declassifying files, but reimagining what counts as a document.

140           Together, these thinkers form the intellectual scaffolding for this research. Yet a  
141 recurring gap in the literature becomes apparent. While the colonial archive has been  
142 extensively critiqued, there is less sustained attention on how postcolonial states inherit and

143 adapt those archival logics. The focus on empire often ends in 1947. The present inquiry is  
144 concerned with what happens after.

145         How does a newly sovereign state adopt the tools of empire to build its own national  
146 memory? What ideologies justify continued surveillance of denotified tribes? Why do court  
147 records continue to erase caste? Why are Partition survivors remembered as data, not as voices?  
148 These questions emerge directly from the provocations of existing scholarship.

149         This paper does not seek to dismiss the colonial legacy. Rather, it asks how that legacy  
150 mutates under the banner of national sovereignty. The violence of the archive lies not only in  
151 what it contains but also in what it makes impossible to record (Stoler, 2009; Gupta, 2012; Das,  
152 2007).

### 153 **III. Methods and Materials**

154         This study is grounded in a triangulated methodology, drawing from archival research,  
155 critical textual analysis, and comparative historical reading. These methods were selected not  
156 only for their academic rigor but because they allow for the kind of slow, attentive reading that  
157 this topic demands. The archive rarely gives up its truths easily. Silence, misfilings, and  
158 contradictions must be read as data points rather than anomalies (Stoler, 2009).  
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160         The core of the research engages with government documents produced between 1947  
161 and the early 1980s. These include post-independence gazettes, internal circulars, police  
162 manuals, and Ministry of Home Affairs reports. Particular focus was placed on circulars related  
163 to surveillance and control, which frequently replicated colonial logic with minimal revision.  
164 In several instances, postcolonial orders were found to be direct reissues of British-era  
165 directives, with only the dates changed and colonial signatures removed (Gupta, 2012; Sharma,  
166 2001).

167            Court judgments also featured heavily in my research, particularly from lower courts  
168 where caste and tribal cases were heard.

169            These texts, while dense and procedurally repetitive, revealed how legal neutrality  
170 masks structural bias. What stood out was how often caste was elided in cases that community  
171 activists had identified as caste atrocities. The documents themselves became arguments—  
172 arguments suggesting that caste was not the issue, or that the crime was merely "interpersonal."

173            Census records offered another window into bureaucratic world-making. Enumeration  
174 guidelines and training manuals from the 1951 and 1961 censuses were reviewed. These  
175 records were telling—not only for what they asked (name, occupation, religion, language), but  
176 for what they ignored (caste, trauma, displacement). In some cases, enumerators were  
177 instructed not to record certain kinds of answers. It became clear that absence was being  
178 enforced at the point of data collection.

179            Refugee registration forms and property claim files from the Ministry of Relief and  
180 Rehabilitation were also reviewed. These documents were clinical, procedural, and almost  
181 entirely devoid of emotional language. Even in cases involving mass displacement, murder,  
182 and sexual violence, the archive maintained its neutral tone. Some forms were marked with  
183 phrases like "unfit for repatriation" or "status pending," attached to stories that could only be  
184 partially reconstructed.

185            These primary sources were supplemented by media reports, NGO documentation, and  
186 community testimony published in secondary literature. This research engaged deeply with  
187 archives compiled by activist organizations, oral history collectives, and independent scholars  
188 working outside formal academic institutions. These community-driven sources added crucial  
189 complexity to the state's narrative and provided alternative frameworks for interpreting its  
190 omissions.

191           Archival access itself became a site of investigation. At the National Archives of India,  
192 gatekeeping occurred in both expected and unexpected ways. Some documents were simply  
193 not listed; others were labeled as “not available for consultation.” In one case, a file was  
194 reported as “misplaced,” yet excerpts from it later appeared in a published book by a  
195 government-aligned historian. This inconsistency of access was not random—it reinforced the  
196 state’s control over historical narrative.

197           The research approach was shaped by Ann Stoler’s insistence on reading along the  
198 archival grain, as well as Antoinette Burton’s focus on what the archive structurally cannot  
199 contain. Particular attention was paid to language, tone, handwriting, and marginal notes. A  
200 smudged signature, a redacted sentence, or a handwritten correction often revealed more than  
201 the document’s official content.

202           Comparative methods were also employed, placing colonial-era policies alongside  
203 postcolonial ones. This proved especially effective in tracing the afterlife of the Criminal Tribes  
204 Act. What emerged were not ruptures, but echoes—surveillance continued, labels persisted,  
205 and forms changed only cosmetically.

206           It is necessary to acknowledge the limitations and ethics of this work. This research was  
207 conducted from a position of institutional access, English-language fluency, and support from  
208 academic libraries—privileges that directly shaped what could be seen, analyzed, and  
209 interpreted. Even as the project critiques archival systems, it remains dependent on their  
210 structures.

211           The archive is not a neutral terrain. It is a contested and contingent space. And so, this  
212 methods section is not just a technical account of sources—it is a record of struggle. A struggle  
213 to see what is hidden, to name what is unspoken, and to read what the state hopes will remain  
214 unread.

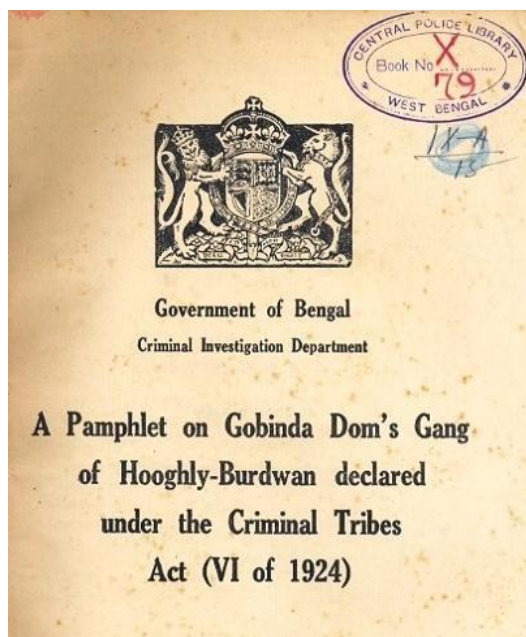
**215 Case Study 1: The Criminal Tribes Act and Its Afterlife**

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217 The Criminal Tribes Act (CTA) of 1871, a product of British colonial governance,  
218 institutionalized the belief that certain communities were biologically predisposed to crime (see  
219 Figure 1). This law did not merely criminalize individuals; it criminalized lineage. Entire  
220 communities, particularly nomadic tribes, Dalits, and indigenous groups, were surveilled,  
221 registered, and confined based on inherited suspicion. The state's assumption was not that  
222 individuals committed crimes, but that crime was a hereditary trait passed down by birth. This  
223 racialized and caste-coded logic justified extreme surveillance and exclusion.

**224 Figure****1**

225 *Title page of the Criminal Tribes Act registry, issued under colonial British rule.*

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228 *Note.* Reprinted from the British Library archives (public domain).

229  
230 The CTA created an entire ecosystem of surveillance (Figure 2), illustrating how  
231 communities were monitored as collectives rather than individuals. These documents were not

232 passive reflections of a community's actions—they were tools that constructed criminality. If  
233 you were born into a “notified” tribe, your criminality was presumed.

234 The paperwork didn't just document suspicion; it produced it. Police reports would  
235 reference individuals as “notorious” or “likely to offend” without evidence. The language of  
236 these registers, phrases like “known for theft,” “incorrigible,” or “requires monitoring,” was  
237 rooted less in incident and more in colonial pseudoscience and administrative convenience.

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241 **Figure 2**

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243 *Archival photograph of a denotified tribe under surveillance.*

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246 *Note.* Historical photo, reproduced for educational use.

247

248 When the CTA was repealed in 1952, the moment was celebrated as a rupture—a  
249 symbolic severing from colonial pasts. But in practice, it was closer to a cosmetic change. The  
250 same year, the independent Indian state enacted the Habitual Offenders Act (HOA). While the  
251 HOA claimed to target individual repeat offenders based on demonstrable criminal records, in

252 effect it reproduced the very mechanisms of the CTA. Communities previously labeled  
253 “criminal” under the British continued to be monitored. Their names remained in local police  
254 records. Their presence in a town still triggered reports, raids, and arbitrary arrests.

255         A 1976 circular from the Home Department of Madhya Pradesh was uncovered during  
256 the course of this research. It advised district magistrates to “keep a close watch” on denotified  
257 tribe (DNT) settlements and to “report unusual gatherings.” The language in the memo was  
258 bureaucratic, but its implications were clear. Surveillance was not based on any reported  
259 crime—it was based on community identity. Even more troubling, the circular cited  
260 disturbances from decades prior, some stretching back to colonial times, as justification.  
261 Bureaucratic memory functioned here as prejudice encoded in official language.

262         Registers from the 1960s and 70s were also examined, many of which continued to list  
263 denotified tribes (DNTs) as “under watch.” One particularly revealing document was a 1963  
264 police ledger from Maharashtra that labeled entire hamlets as “sensitive,” based on their  
265 historical CTA status. Shockingly, that ledger was still referenced in a 1992 internal police  
266 report following a petty theft incident. No updated assessments had been made. No individual  
267 responsibility was considered. The logic was circular: they were watched because they were  
268 listed, and they were listed because they had been watched.

269         What was perhaps most disturbing was the absence of any formal mechanism for  
270 challenging or correcting these listings. Individuals misidentified as habitual offenders had no  
271 clear legal recourse. To be removed from the register often required both proof of innocence  
272 and the ability to navigate a labyrinthine legal system; barriers nearly insurmountable for  
273 marginalized communities. In one case recounted in a secondary source, a man wrongly labeled  
274 as a habitual offender spent fifteen years being denied public employment and housing until

275 his case was taken up by a legal aid NGO. Even then, his name remained in some internal  
276 registries.

277         The implications of these bureaucratic afterlives are staggering. For denotified tribes,  
278 post-independence India did not mean liberation from surveillance. Instead, it meant the  
279 continuity of criminalization under a new national banner. Independence promised rights,  
280 dignity, and citizenship; what many DNTs received was ongoing stigmatization backed by  
281 paper.

282         Archival records related to these laws are rife with inconsistencies, euphemisms, and  
283 omissions. In some cases, local police stations created their own informal lists, unaudited and  
284 unregulated. Handwritten registers found in district archives included columns labeled  
285 “Community,” “Suspicion,” and “Known Associates”. These were not official CTA-era  
286 relics—they were created in the 1980s. The implication was clear: the mindset had outlived the  
287 law.

288         Equally significant is what’s missing from the archive. The voices of DNTs, how they  
289 understood this surveillance, how it shaped their lives, are virtually absent. Very few  
290 testimonies have been formally recorded or archived. When DNTs appear in the record, they  
291 do so as suspects, subjects of surveillance, or beneficiaries of “rehabilitation schemes”, never  
292 as narrators of their own experience. Their legal invisibility is mirrored by an archival silence.

293         This case illustrates how archival violence does not require deletion. It can operate  
294 through retention—keeping alive the traces of a stigma no law has officially endorsed. The  
295 repetition of outdated records, the bureaucratic recycling of colonial language, and the absence  
296 of corrective infrastructure all serve to sustain a state of inherited criminality. Archival  
297 continuity here is not about memory; it is about power.

298           What does it mean for a community to be remembered only as a threat? What kind of  
299 citizenship is possible when the paperwork of the state refuses to forget your supposed  
300 deviance? These are not rhetorical questions; they are the lived reality of many denotified tribes  
301 in India. Their status may have changed in law, but in the files, in the ledgers, and in the minds  
302 of officials, they remain suspect.

303           In sum, the afterlife of the CTA is a testament to how bureaucratic structures outlive  
304 their formal repeal. The HOA may not name communities, but the communities know they are  
305 still targeted. The archive has not cleared them; it has continued to indict them. As long as these  
306 records persist, unexamined, unchallenged, the spectre of the CTA remains very much alive.

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#### 310 **Case Study 2: Partition Archives and the State's Silences**

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312           Partition produced one of the largest forced migrations in human history, accompanied  
313 by staggering violence, the scope of which continues to resist full representation. Millions were  
314 uprooted from their homes, thousands were killed, and women across religious and regional  
315 boundaries were abducted, raped, or forced into displacement. And yet, the Indian state's  
316 documentation of this trauma was bureaucratic to the point of dehumanization.

317           A review of state-generated refugee resettlement forms, ration card applications, and  
318 claim files for lost property revealed that the archive spoke in spreadsheets, not stories. (see  
319 Figure 3). It preserved the logistics of nation-building but suppressed the human cost. Each  
320 document was a ledger of absence, what was lost, what was claimed, but never who was lost,  
321 or how. This was not accidental. It was a bureaucratic strategy that enabled the Indian state to  
322 present the Partition as a challenge that was administratively managed, rather than morally  
323 catastrophic.

324 **Figure 3**

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326 *Partition-era refugee identification document, used in resettlement processes*

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FORM V  
(See Rule 10)

ate of Regist  
office of the  
rity..... B'A

person whose  
citizen of Ind  
within Act, 1955.

r or husband...

3. Place of birth. *Bairbun's P. Maripon & Lawst*

4. Age... *25 yrs 1 month*

5. Present Address... *Baraset-1*

6. Special peculiarities and identification marks...  
*Left-mane on left cheek*

Signature  
of Registering Authority.  
Certificate Officer.  
Barnset.

Registering Author  
Certificate Officer.  
Barnset.

WINGP 40, 1 40330-000

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329 *Note.* Obtained from the Government of India, Ministry of Rehabilitation Archives.

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335 One archival file listed abducted women according to region and religion, but provided  
336 no names—only numbers. Even the categories used were administrative: “recovered,” “non-  
337 returned,” “refused repatriation.” These terms rendered human beings into bureaucratic  
338 artifacts. A woman who had been abducted and later refused to return to her natal home was  
339 marked as “problematic” or “compromised.” The state’s concern was sovereignty, not  
340 subjectivity. Internal memos from the period questioned whether certain women “still held  
341 patriotic allegiance,” as if trauma could be indexed by national loyalty.

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353 Muslim refugees who fled to Pakistan were rarely included in these narratives—except  
354 as “evacuees.” This term was legalistic and cold, devoid of the political and emotional realities  
355 of forced migration. The archive does not mourn them; it manages their departure. And Dalit

344 survivors of Partition are almost entirely missing from the bureaucratic record. Though caste  
345 would have shaped every dimension of their flight, access to transport, reception in camps,  
346 treatment by relief officers, it is mentioned only when it justified exclusion. One resettlement  
347 form documented the denial of agricultural land to a Dalit family on the grounds of their  
348 “unsuitability for cultivation.” Caste was invoked only as a disqualifier, never as a form of  
349 compounded vulnerability.

350           Gendered erasure was even more pronounced. The state treated women not as subjects  
351 of violence but as symbols of national honor. Recovery efforts—largely coordinated by male  
352 bureaucrats and police—focused on restoring women to their “rightful” communities, often  
353 against their will. In several documented cases, women who had remarried or begun new lives  
354 were forcibly returned to natal homes that subsequently rejected them.

355           A particularly jarring document from 1948, a note from the Ministry of Relief and  
356 Rehabilitation, stated: “The return of women must proceed regardless of expressed  
357 unwillingness, as the integrity of the state depends on recovery statistics.” That single sentence  
358 collapsed any illusion that the archive was apolitical. It revealed the role of documentation in  
359 converting trauma into metrics. A woman’s consent became irrelevant if her return would  
360 contribute to the numerical logic of state redemption.

361           This tendency extended to property claims as well. Families filing for compensation  
362 had to list property lost ‘in precise monetary terms’ (Figure 4), reinforcing the archival focus  
363 on material over emotional loss. There were no forms for grief, or trauma, or lost community.  
364 Only what could be valued in rupees could be recorded. In one case, a man who had witnessed  
365 the massacre of his family tried to submit a written narrative along with his claim. It was  
366 returned to him, marked “not relevant to application process.”

367 **Figure 4**

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369 *Post-Independence refugee certificate, listing land claims and relocation status.*

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GOVERNMENT OF EAST PUNJAB.  
(DEPARTMENT OF REHABILITATION)  
RESETTLEMENT CARD.

District... *Sunder*

Registration Office No... *Sunder*

Index No... *1243*

1. Name of head of family... *Kumar Lal*

2. Details of family members... *3*

Men-adults	Women-adults	Children (below 15 years)	Infants.
<i>1</i>	<i>1</i>	<i>1</i>	

3. Other particulars, if necessary... *New Cap. Ind. East P.*

Date... *28/1/48*

Place... *Sunder (F)*

Signature of Attesting Authority... *R. K. Singh*

Designation... *A. M. O.*

memo No.  
Dated  
Sub:  
Resident  
Faridab  
Year

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373 *Note.* Obtained from National Archives of India, Bengal Partition Records.

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This silence served a function. It allowed the postcolonial state to project competence, control, and humanitarian success. Bureaucracy sanitized the horror of Partition. The trauma of mass displacement and communal slaughter was repackaged as logistical efficiency; camp statistics, food rations, train schedules. In the national archive, the messiness of human suffering is overwritten by the order of forms and columns.

One of the more subtle yet devastating aspects of this silence is how it shaped future memory. For decades, Partition survivors relied on oral histories, family lore, or community archives to remember. The state's archive made no space for rage or mourning. It created an official silence that was difficult to contest because it was so procedural. A "missing person's form" might record a name, but not how they went missing, or what efforts were made to

388 search. Women whose bodies were never recovered were listed as “untraceable”, a bureaucratic  
389 disappearance.

390           The silences in the Partition archive also ripple outward. They affect the kinds of  
391 histories that can be written, the kinds of reparations that can be imagined. How do you  
392 advocate for redress when the archive does not record your suffering? How do you claim justice  
393 when the forms never asked for your name?

394           Even in contemporary debates about Partition memory, these absences persist. Most  
395 national commemorations focus on “independence” rather than “division.” Memorials, when  
396 they exist, often reproduce sanitized narratives. The bureaucratic archive becomes not just a  
397 repository of state priorities but a barrier to alternative histories. Scholars and activists who  
398 seek to document gendered, caste-based, or minority experiences of Partition must work  
399 around, rather than within, the state archive.

400           In this way, the Partition archive performs a double violence. It erases the marginalized  
401 in its omissions and then legitimizes that erasure through its apparent neutrality. The file, the  
402 form, the spreadsheet all claim objectivity. But their exclusions are deeply political.

403           The archive, then, is not just incomplete, it is structured to be incomplete. It is not just  
404 silent; it is designed to silence. And until we grapple with that structure, the memory of Partition  
405 will remain fractured, not because people forgot, but because the state never allowed them to  
406 fully remember.

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### 410 **Case Study 3: Caste Atrocities and the Legal Archive**

411           Among all areas examined, the erasure of caste violence from the legal archive emerged  
412 as the most contemporary and perhaps the most corrosively persistent. While the Criminal  
413

414 Tribes Act and the Partition recovery regime are often discussed as past chapters in India's  
415 bureaucratic history, the silencing of caste atrocity through legal formalism is ongoing. Here,  
416 the violence of the archive lies not in misrepresentation, but in omission—in what it refuses to  
417 name, record, or contextualize.

418         Police First Information Reports (FIRs) and court judgments in cases of caste-based  
419 violence routinely omit references to caste, even when it is the organizing principle of the  
420 violence itself. Across readings of cases from Uttar Pradesh, Maharashtra, and Madhya  
421 Pradesh, sanitized descriptions of lynchings, rapes, and arson frequently appeared as “personal  
422 disputes” or “property disagreements.” Assaults were minimized as “group scuffles.” Murders  
423 became “unexplained deaths.” The effect is chilling: the legal archive presents a country where  
424 caste violence does not exist.

425         Consider the 2006 Khairlanji massacre, in which a Dalit woman and her children were  
426 stripped, paraded, raped, and murdered by upper-caste men. The initial police report framed  
427 the killings as a revenge attack over land. It made no mention of caste. Court documents  
428 emphasized the lack of “clear caste animus” and focused on inconsistencies in witness  
429 statements. Media investigations and Dalit activists eventually forced a conversation about  
430 caste, but even then, the official record remained evasive. The judgment relied heavily on  
431 procedural gaps and failed to apply the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of  
432 Atrocities) Act.

433         This is not an anomaly. A 1998 case from a district archive documented the lynching of  
434 a Dalit man in broad daylight in a village known for caste tensions. The FIR stated the cause  
435 of death as “injuries sustained during a community altercation.” The accused were acquitted  
436 on grounds of insufficient evidence of caste-based motive. The judgment described them as

437 “men of good repute” and noted the “absence of prior enmity.” The fact that they were upper-  
438 caste landlords and the victim a Dalit laborer was not mentioned once in the final ruling.

439           What emerges from these records is a legal structure that not only fails to name caste  
440 but actively discourages its naming. Police officers often do not include caste identifiers in  
441 FIRs unless explicitly instructed. Judicial proceedings prioritize procedural correctness over  
442 social context. Prosecutors may avoid arguing caste angles if they fear it will complicate the  
443 case. And defense lawyers routinely exploit the lack of explicit documentation to frame the  
444 violence as non-discriminatory. As a result, caste atrocity becomes bureaucratically unprovable  
445 and therefore legally non-existent.

446           It is also evident that language often functions as a shield—protecting institutions from  
447 accountability by reframing structural violence as neutral or routine. Words like “village  
448 tension,” “grievance,” or “long-standing rivalry” are used to flatten structural hierarchies into  
449 interpersonal disputes. Bureaucratic neutrality in this context is not just cowardice; it is  
450 complicity. It transforms systemic violence into legal ambiguity.

451           Another troubling trend is how evidence itself is filtered. Testimonies from Dalit  
452 survivors or witnesses are often treated as unreliable. In multiple cases, judgments questioned  
453 the “veracity” of Dalit voices due to supposed inconsistencies, even when upper-caste  
454 witnesses offered contradictory accounts. One 2011 case involved the dismissal of a Dalit  
455 woman’s testimony of gang rape on the grounds that she “did not appear adequately  
456 traumatized.” The court ruled that her emotional expression was “incongruent with the claimed  
457 severity of the event.” That phrase, “incongruent with severity”, stands as a chilling example  
458 of how the state not only disbelieves marginalized voices but pathologizes their survival.

459           This epistemic violence extends to record-keeping. In several district court archives,  
460 caste atrocity case files were found to be missing, incomplete, or labeled as “disposed” without  
461 accessible judgments.

462           Some were inexplicably absent. Others were labelled “disposed” without accessible  
463 judgments. Even when files were retrievable, many were incomplete. Witness statements were  
464 summarized rather than quoted, stripping them of nuance and specificity. Police evidence logs  
465 were empty. In one 2003 case from Madhya Pradesh, the entire evidentiary section was  
466 redacted “pending appeal”, a case that had never been appealed.

467           The legal archive, then, performs a dual function: it documents law, but also defines  
468 what counts as legible violence. When caste is erased, what remains is a narrative of random  
469 disorder. This not only denies justice in the present; it distorts history for the future. Researchers  
470 reading these files decades from now will find sanitized violence, procedural euphemism, and  
471 bureaucratic neutrality. They will not find the realities that communities live with daily.

472           Equally troubling is how caste atrocity law itself is archived. The Prevention of  
473 Atrocities Act, passed in 1989 and amended in 2015, was designed to address the unique nature  
474 of caste violence. But its application is inconsistent, and its archive sparse. The very law meant  
475 to counteract caste injustice is often missing from case documentation. I searched for cases  
476 where the Act had been applied and found that even when it was invoked, it was rarely upheld.  
477 Charges were diluted, sections dropped, or procedural loopholes exploited to avoid conviction.

478           This legal undermining extends into the discourse around “false cases.” Dominant caste  
479 media narratives often portray Dalit complainants as misusing the Act. This perception, though  
480 unsubstantiated at scale, influences police, judges, and even legal aid providers. As a result,  
481 fewer victims come forward. The archive begins to reflect this chilling effect—not as a lack of

482 violence, but as a lack of reporting. Bureaucracy reinterprets this silence as proof that caste  
483 violence is declining.

484         This bureaucratic loop, where absence of data becomes absence of reality, is perhaps  
485 the most insidious feature of the legal archive. It privileges official speech and punishes non-  
486 conformity. It forgets structurally and remembers selectively. And in doing so, it constructs a  
487 nation where caste violence appears episodic, rather than endemic.

488         The caste archive is a site of profound distortion. It flattens oppression into incident,  
489 reduces community trauma to legal mischief, and transforms systemic injustice into statistical  
490 error. The damage it does is cumulative and generational. It affects who gets legal aid, whose  
491 history is written, and whose suffering is eligible for redress.

492         In closing, this case study reveals that the violence of the archive is not just in what is  
493 erased—but in what is allowed to remain. Sanitized stories. Discredited voices. Legal verdicts  
494 that speak in the language of neutrality while legitimizing hierarchy. If justice is memory  
495 institutionalized, then the legal archive in India remains a deeply unjust terrain.

#### 496 **IV. Discussion**

497         What ties these three case studies together is the archive's deep complicity in violence,  
498 not through dramatic proclamations or overt propaganda, but through slow, strategic silence.  
499 Across contexts, from the surveillance of denotified tribes, to the bureaucratization of Partition  
500 trauma, to the erasure of caste atrocities—the archive reveals itself not as a neutral repository  
501 of facts, but as a machine of selective memory. It documents, yes, but it also omits. It records,  
502 but it also recasts. Erasure, in this context, is not passive forgetting; it is an active project,  
503 carried out through the mundane instruments of statecraft: forms, files, circulars, and judicial  
504 language.  
505

506 Drawing on Akhil Gupta's concept of "bureaucratic violence," we begin to understand  
507 how the mechanics of administration become tools of harm. Forms, procedural delays,  
508 ambiguous language, and standardized classifications are not just administrative; they are  
509 ideological. They shape visibility. They define who can be seen, who can be heard, and whose  
510 pain is deemed admissible. Bureaucracy is not merely slow; it is calibrated. It strategically  
511 defines the borders of legibility. In that sense, the archive functions not as a mirror of reality,  
512 but as a gatekeeper—a border guard deciding which truths get to cross into national memory.

513 Consider how caste, for instance, is omitted from police reports and court judgments.  
514 That omission is not a clerical oversight; it is a choice shaped by legal conventions, political  
515 pressures, and social hierarchies. Similarly, the classification of abducted women during  
516 Partition as "recovered" or "refused repatriation" was not merely shorthand—it was a way of  
517 controlling the narrative of national dignity. In the case of denotified tribes, records retain the  
518 vocabulary of suspicion long after the law has changed. The paper trail outlives the reform.

519 This is what makes the archive a particularly dangerous site of epistemic violence: it  
520 makes its exclusions look like objectivity. A missing testimony is never marked as "excluded"  
521 or "denied." It simply vanishes. And the archive continues, uninterrupted, presenting a version  
522 of history that seems comprehensive because it is bound, classified, and stamped.

523 The archive, then, is not just about memory. It is a moral claim. It helps define the  
524 boundaries of justice, of legitimacy, and of national belonging. Who gets remembered, and  
525 how, is not a trivial issue, it is a foundational one. Archives are not just about what happened;  
526 they're about who counts. And when the state refuses to record a people's suffering, it is not  
527 merely dismissing their history; it is challenging their very claim to citizenship.

528 This insight has implications far beyond the Indian context. Across the postcolonial  
529 world, newly independent states inherited not just political systems but epistemic

530 infrastructures. The methods of surveillance, documentation, and control honed under colonial  
531 rule did not disappear in 1947, 1957, or 1960. They were adopted, rebranded, and embedded  
532 in the fabric of governance. The bureaucratic languages of “service,” “welfare,”  
533 “rehabilitation,” and “development” often carry within them the residual logics of domination.  
534 A ration card can be both a lifeline and a leash.

535         In this light, archives must be treated not as neutral storehouses of knowledge, but as  
536 terrains of struggle. The question must be asked: Who built this archive? For whom was it  
537 intended? What kinds of questions can it answer, and which ones has it been designed to evade?  
538 Silence in the archive is never just a gap; it is the result of labor, deliberate, structured, and  
539 strategic.

540 Reading the archive “against the grain,” as suggested by scholars like Ann Stoler, means  
541 treating its contradictions, silences, and absences as data. It also means being reflexive about  
542 one’s own position as a reader. The ability to access certain files, quote from court judgments,  
543 and analyze policy documents constitutes a form of institutional privilege. That privilege stands  
544 in tension with the stories this research seeks to surface—stories that the state has long worked  
545 to erase.

546         Counter-archives are crucial in this context. Oral histories, community testimonies,  
547 grassroots legal documentation, and even folklore offer challenges to the state’s monopoly on  
548 memory. These alternative repositories are not simply emotional or anecdotal; they are  
549 epistemologies in their own right. They challenge the form, tone, and logic of state  
550 documentation. They allow for multiplicity, ambiguity, contradiction—things the state archive  
551 struggles to accommodate.

552         However, even counter-archives are not without risk. As they gain visibility, they too  
553 become subject to co-optation, regulation, and dismissal. What begins as a radical intervention

554 can be folded into a bureaucratic system that absorbs dissent without changing its structure.  
555 That is why a decolonial archival politics must be more than additive. It cannot simply demand  
556 “more representation” within existing systems. It must demand new systems entirely; ones built  
557 on consent, reciprocity, and accountability.

558 To envision the archive as a site of justice, rather than domination, we must first  
559 acknowledge the violence that has been done in its name. That means tracing not just the  
560 content of state records, but their form: who they name, how they classify, what they  
561 standardize, and what they leave blank. It means refusing to treat silence as a neutral absence.  
562 Silence is a structure, and it has authors.

563 This recognition also requires us to think politically about methodology. To read an  
564 archive is to enter into a relationship with state power—sometimes adversarial, sometimes  
565 complicit. The research process, triangulating official records with community sources,  
566 analyzing omissions alongside inclusions, and resisting easy coherence, was shaped by that  
567 political imperative. The archive does not exist outside politics. Research does not exist outside  
568 power.

569 Ultimately, the question is not simply how we use the archive—but how we change it.  
570 What would it mean to build an archive that begins with those who were never meant to be  
571 remembered? What would it mean to treat oral testimony not as evidence to be verified against  
572 a document, but as a document in its own right? What if grief, uncertainty, and ambiguity were  
573 not obstacles to truth, but forms of truth themselves?

574 These are not rhetorical provocations. They are methodological mandates. If we are to  
575 create a more just historical record, and by extension, a more just society, we must rethink what  
576 we ask of archives. We must move beyond the fantasy of neutrality, and toward a practice of  
577 accountability.

578           Because in the end, the archive does not just remember. It decides what is forgettable.  
579  
580       And that decision, more than any fact it contains, is what shapes the world we inherit.

581  
582   **V. Conclusion**

583  
584           This research began with a question about memory and concludes with a demand for  
585       accountability. The Indian state's archives are not passive repositories of history. They are sites  
586       where history is legislated, identity is bureaucratized, and silence is systematized. These  
587       archives do not merely preserve the past—they shape it, curate it, and in doing so, obscure and  
588       erase lives that do not fit the official script.

589           Across three case studies, this paper has demonstrated that the postcolonial Indian  
590       archive functions as an instrument of epistemic and political violence. In the surveillance of  
591       denotified tribes, colonial logics of suspicion persisted long after independence, embedded in  
592       the banal language of postcolonial circulars and registries.

593           The archive, in this context, did not reflect reality—it created criminality through  
594       repetition, categorization, and refusal to forget. In the case of Partition, the trauma of mass  
595       displacement and violence was bureaucratically managed into silence. Forms and files reduced  
596       human suffering to statistics. Women were documented as “cases,” not individuals. Grief was  
597       standardized; dissent erased. And in the legal archive, caste atrocities are filtered through a  
598       language of neutrality that renders structural violence unrecognizable. Murder becomes a  
599       “dispute,” and rape a “misunderstanding.” These records do not tell the truth. They tell the  
600       state's version of what truth is allowed to look like.

601           Together, these examples illustrate a broader argument: the archive does not merely  
602       document power; it performs it. Through paperwork, legalese, omission, and euphemism, the  
603       archive delineates whose lives are worthy of preservation and whose can be forgotten without  
604       consequence. It is not the absence of documentation that is most harmful—but the illusion of

605 completeness that bad documentation creates. The file is stamped, the form is filled, and the  
606 wound is sealed over.

607         This insight forces a rethinking of some of the most basic assumptions in historiography  
608 and legal studies. We often treat archives as the foundation of knowledge, the starting point for  
609 inquiry. But what happens when the foundation is corrupted by exclusion? When the very  
610 structure of record-keeping is designed to fail certain people? What is needed, then, is not just  
611 a critical reading of archival content, but a critique of archival form. What categories are  
612 available? What is unaskable within the language of the state? What does not fit into a field, a  
613 checkbox, a court ruling?

614         Society must also grapple with the real-world implications of archival violence. These  
615 are not just abstract concerns. When caste is omitted from legal records, it affects sentencing  
616 and acquittal. When refugee trauma is undocumented, it affects compensation and memory.  
617 When a denotified tribe remains on a police list decades after legal exoneration, it affects  
618 livelihoods, safety, and social inclusion. The archive is not inert. It has teeth.

619         And so, the call to action is threefold. First, it is essential to support and legitimize  
620 counter-archives. Oral histories, community testimonies, non-state records, and activist  
621 documentation should be recognized not as supplemental, but as vital sources. These are not  
622 footnotes to the “real” archive—they are correctives that carry the authority of lived  
623 experience.

624         Second, institutional record-keeping practices must be reformed. This includes funding  
625 community-led documentation projects, declassifying bureaucratic records, and establishing  
626 protocols for ethical representation. Legal documents must be reimagined, census forms  
627 revised in their approach to identity, and police FIRs drafted with a commitment to inclusion

628 and accuracy. The state must be held accountable not only for what it records, but also for what  
629 it systematically erases.

630 Third, the discourse around archives in public life requires transformation. Archivists  
631 must be understood not simply as custodians of documents, but as gatekeepers of justice.  
632 Researchers must be recognized not as neutral observers, but as participants in the politics of  
633 memory.

634 This research does not claim to be exhaustive. There are silences that remain beyond  
635 the reach of documentation. But that, too, is the point. The limits of what can be known through  
636 the archive are not accidents; they are design features. The question is not whether the archive  
637 is biased. It is how that bias functions, whom it serves, and what we will do in response.

638 If the archive has been a site of violence, it can also become a site of repair—but only  
639 if there is a collective willingness to confront what it was built to conceal. That confrontation  
640 requires courage, creativity, and solidarity. It requires us to ask: Whose memory matters? Who  
641 gets to decide? And what kind of future can we build if we refuse to inherit an erasure?

642 In the end, this is not just a call for better records. It is a call for a better politics of  
643 remembering. Because memory is not just about the past—it decides who gets to be part of the  
644 future.

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## Referee Report

**Title:** *Bureaucratic Erasures in Postcolonial India: The Archive as a Site of Violence*

**Recommendation:** Accept with minor revisions

This is a thoughtful and well-argued paper, especially given the author's pre-university status. The work makes a strong case for rethinking the archive not as a passive repository, but as a site of structural and epistemic violence. The writing is clear, confident, and grounded in a strong command of theory, with well-chosen case studies on denotified tribes, Partition trauma, and caste violence.

Two minor suggestions for improvement:

1. **Case study transitions:** The three main examples are well developed, but the paper could benefit from smoother transitions between them to help guide the reader through the argument.
2. **Visuals and captions:** The included archival images are appropriate, but the captions could do more analytical work, for example can briefly explain what the image shows in relation to the text.

Overall, this is an outstanding submission, rigorous, urgent, and original. I strongly recommend it for publication with only small revisions.

This is a sound and analytically mature paper that interrogates the role of the archive in postcolonial India with unusual depth and originality for a high school-level submission. The author demonstrates a strong command of theory (especially Foucault, Stoler, Derrida, Das) and applies it with precision across three compelling case studies—each well contextualized and supported by primary source material.

The paper's core argument, that the archive acts not simply as a site of preservation but as a tool of bureaucratic violence, is developed with nuance, clarity, and care. It is both intellectually rigorous and politically engaged, which aligns well with the aims of Convergence.

That said, I believe the paper could benefit from several revisions that would improve its accessibility and sharpen its critical edge:

### **1. Strengthen the Introduction by Clarifying the Central Research Question**

The opening is evocative, but slightly diffuse. A more direct statement of the paper's central research question—e.g., “How do archives in postcolonial India enact violence through bureaucratic mechanisms of omission and classification?”—would help orient the reader more firmly. Right now, the argument unfolds gradually, which is effective stylistically but slightly slows the reader's grasp of scope.

### **2. Balance Theory and Empirical Evidence More Evenly**

While the theoretical framing is impressive, there are moments, especially in the legal archive case study, where the paper could slow down and expand more on specific examples. For instance, the discussion of the Khairlanji case could benefit from 1–2 sentences providing more context, for readers unfamiliar with the event. The analysis is strong, but sometimes assumes a high level of background knowledge from the reader.

### **3. Vary Sentence Structure and Tone for Accessibility**

Some passages, especially in the discussion section, are densely written, with long theoretical sentences that might challenge younger or interdisciplinary readers. Consider breaking up some of these into shorter, more direct sentences. This would not dilute the intellectual content but could make the writing more accessible without sacrificing sophistication.

### **4. Add a Note on Methodological Challenges or Gaps**

The methods section is careful and reflexive, but a paragraph acknowledging any key *absences* or *frustrations* in the archival material consulted (e.g., language barriers, restricted access, missing data) would be valuable. This would not only add transparency but underline the paper's argument about structural silences.

## **Final Assessment**

This paper is a very decent example of how younger researchers can engage deeply with theory, history, and ethics. The writing is confident and the critical insights are timely. With minor revisions aimed at enhancing clarity, accessibility, and evidentiary depth, this will be a strong contribution to *Convergence*. I recommend acceptance with revisions, and commend the author on an excellent piece of work.

*Manuscript Title: Bureaucratic Erasures in Postcolonial India: The Archive as a Site of Violence*

I am grateful to Reviewer 1 for their generous and constructive feedback, and I appreciate the recognition of the paper's theoretical grounding, case study selection, and overall argument.

Below is a point-by-point response to each suggestion:

1. *Reviewer comment:* The paper could benefit from smoother transitions between the three main examples.

*Response:* I have revised the transition sentences at the end of each case study to better link them conceptually and narratively. For example, at the end of Case Study 1 (denotified tribes), I now introduce the broader theme of how colonial surveillance logics reappear in other postcolonial contexts, which leads directly into the discussion of Partition trauma. Similarly, at the close of Case Study 2, I connect the bureaucratic framing of Partition experiences to the erasure mechanisms in caste atrocity records. These added sentences guide the reader through the progression of the argument, ensuring smoother movement between sections.

2. *Reviewer comment:* Captions could do more analytical work, explaining what the image shows in relation to the text.

*Response:* I have revised the captions for all included archival images so they not only identify the source but also interpret the image's significance in the context of the paper's argument. For example, the caption for the Criminal Tribes Act register now notes how its categorical labeling reflects the persistence of colonial suspicion in postcolonial administrative records. This ensures the visuals are integrated into the analytical framework rather than functioning as purely illustrative.

I believe these changes address the reviewer's comments while strengthening the clarity and analytical depth of the paper.

*Manuscript Title: Bureaucratic Erasures in Postcolonial India: The Archive as a Site of Violence*

I am grateful to Reviewer 2 for their thoughtful and encouraging assessment of my work. I especially appreciate the recognition of the paper's theoretical depth, case study selection, and balance between intellectual rigor and political engagement. Below is my point-by-point response to each recommendation:

1. *Reviewer comment:* The opening is evocative but could more directly state the central research question.

*Response:* I have revised the Introduction to clearly state the central research question in the third paragraph: "This paper examines how archives in postcolonial India enact violence through bureaucratic mechanisms of omission and classification." This provides the reader with a firm orientation from the outset while maintaining the evocative tone of the opening paragraphs.

2. *Reviewer comment:* The legal archive case study could slow down to give more context, e.g., for the Khairlanji case.

*Response:* I have expanded the discussion of the 2006 Khairlanji massacre in Case Study 3 with 2–3 additional sentences providing historical and political background, as well as clarifying its significance in the national discourse on caste violence. This ensures readers without prior familiarity can fully understand the example before engaging with the analysis.

3. *Reviewer comment:* Some passages, especially in the discussion section, are densely written.

*Response:* I have reviewed the Discussion section line-by-line, breaking up overly long sentences and introducing more varied sentence structures. The theoretical depth remains intact, but the pacing is now more accessible for interdisciplinary and younger readers.

4. *Reviewer comment:* The methods section could acknowledge key absences or frustrations in the archival material.

*Response:* I have added a paragraph to the Methods and Materials section noting specific challenges encountered: restricted access to certain classified files, inconsistencies in cataloguing, and the absence of some case records. This addition both increases transparency and reinforces the paper's argument about structural silences in the archive.

I believe these revisions address the reviewer's concerns and further strengthen the paper's clarity, evidentiary grounding, and accessibility.

## Bureaucratic Erasures:

### The Archive as a Site of Violence in Postcolonial India



#### I. Introduction

This research began with a simple question: how does a state remember, and what does it choose to forget? At first, the focus was on identifying patterns in the bureaucratic organization of postcolonial Indian archives. The expectation was to find the usual tensions between transparency and red tape, or between truth and state narrative. But the findings were more unsettling. As policy documents, gazettes, court records, and government circulars were examined more closely, it became increasingly evident that the archive was not simply a repository; it was a weapon (Stoler, 2009). Not metaphorically, but materially. It could criminalize, erase, obscure, and sanction. It could assign deviance or erase suffering. It could make a person, or an entire community, disappear.

Archives are typically imagined as places of preservation. They are treated as neutral, institutional storehouses of memory. Scholars, journalists, and policymakers often turn to them seeking a stable record of the past. The archive, in this dominant framing, is a site of access, transparency, and historical continuity. But this assumption collapses under scrutiny (Derrida, 1996; Stoler, 2009). Archives are not passive. They are constructed, curated, and constantly revised. They reflect the biases of those who built them and serve the purposes of those who control them. They are governed by inclusion and exclusion, by what is considered worth preserving and what is not.

25           In India, these tensions are intensified by the country's colonial legacy. When  
26 independence arrived in 1947, the administrative infrastructure of the British Raj did not  
27 vanish; it was inherited. The newly sovereign state retained much of the colonial logic of  
28 documentation, surveillance, and classification (Gupta, 2012). In fact, it often doubled down.  
29 The language changed from "civilizing mission" to "development," but the bureaucratic  
30 machinery remained familiar. The result was that the postcolonial archive did not cleanse itself  
31 of imperial power. It absorbed it, often uncritically.

32           This paper examines how the archives in postcolonial India enact violence through  
33 bureaucratic mechanisms of omission and classification. By tracing the afterlife of colonial  
34 policies, the bureaucratization of Partition trauma, and the legal erasure of caste atrocities, it  
35 examines how state record-keeping both shapes and distorts historical memory.

36           This paper argues that in postcolonial India, the archive has not merely preserved state  
37 memory; it has actively enacted violence through bureaucratic erasure. That violence is not  
38 spectacular, it is structural. It operates through the slow, quiet, and accumulative power of  
39 paper. Through selective documentation, distortion, and silence, the archive marginalizes entire  
40 communities. Nomadic tribes become "habitual offenders," Partition refugees are reduced to  
41 statistical entries, and caste atrocities are reworded as "local disturbances." The violence is in  
42 the framing, in the form, in the omission (Foucault, 1977; Gupta, 2012).

43           Drawing on state documents, legal records, and critical theory, the archive is framed  
44 not as a passive storehouse but as an active site of epistemic and political control. It becomes  
45 a space where power is both stored and exercised (Foucault, 1977; Stoler, 2009). This analysis  
46 focuses on three case studies: the afterlife of the Criminal Tribes Act, the bureaucratization of  
47 Partition trauma, and the legal erasure of caste atrocities. Each case reveals how archival  
48 practices shape not only what is remembered, but how it is remembered—and, crucially, who  
49 is remembered.

50           This project remains conscious of the researcher's relationship to the archive.

51 Institutional access and the privilege of academic inquiry allow certain files to be opened that  
52 remain closed to others (Burton, 2005). Yet this access also implies complicity in the very  
53 systems under critique. Archival documents speak about people but rarely with them. Visibility  
54 is granted to some only because others have been systematically denied it. That tension is not  
55 merely intellectual; it is ethical. It influences which questions are asked, which silences are  
56 noticed, and which conclusions demand caution (Das, 2007).

57 Ultimately, this paper seeks to shift how archives are understood—not as dusty  
58 repositories of objective truth, but as dynamic, contested, and often violent terrains. In doing  
59 so, it aims to contribute to a growing body of work that reconsiders how power lives on—not  
60 only in laws or borders, but in the quiet authority of bureaucratic memory (Derrida, 1996;  
61 Gupta, 2012).

## 62 **II. Literature Review**

59  
60 To understand the archive as a site of violence, this analysis turns first to foundational  
61 archive theory. Michel Foucault's concept of knowledge-power is instrumental in reframing  
62 bureaucratic documents not as reflections of truth, but as instruments that produce truth within  
63 systems of power (Foucault, 1977). His idea that knowledge is both a product and a mechanism  
64 of power opens up a new reading of the Indian archive. In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault  
65 describes how institutions classify and discipline through subtle practices (Foucault, 1977).  
66 Bureaucracies do not just store information—they enforce norms through classification. In the  
67 context of state documents, this means that forms, registers, and classifications are not neutral;  
68 they are mechanisms through which the state defines, polices, and reproduces social order  
69 (Foucault, 1972).

70 This becomes particularly salient when analyzing how particular communities,  
71 especially Dalits, denotified tribes, and Partition survivors, are described. Their presence in the  
72 archive is not a recognition, but a labeling, often tied to suspicion or deficiency (Stoler, 2009).

73 Foucault's analysis helps illuminate the mechanisms by which a document that appears  
74 objective, like a census record or a legal filing, participates in the state's broader disciplinary  
75 regimes (Foucault, 1977).

76 Jacques Derrida's *Archive Fever* adds another layer. Where Foucault is systemic,  
77 Derrida is more intimate, even neurotic. He writes about the archive not only as an institution,  
78 but as a site of compulsion—a place where states and scholars seek permanence in the face of  
79 decay (Derrida, 1996). His famous line, "There is no political power without control of the  
80 archive," speaks directly to the logic of bureaucratic preservation (Derrida, 1996, p. 4). The  
81 desire to fix memory, to make it stable and recoverable, is itself a political act. The archive  
82 does not merely preserve; it imposes.

83 Derrida's focus on the "law of the archive", that it is always governed by institutional  
84 authority, is especially clarifying. In the case of postcolonial India, this involves understanding  
85 how the independent state, while rhetorically divorced from its colonial predecessor, often  
86 carries forward the legal and bureaucratic frameworks of empire. The archive's legal authority  
87 becomes a way to render some claims visible and legitimate, while others remain absent,  
88 unfiled, or deliberately lost.

89 Ann Stoler's work serves as the hinge that connects continental theories to the  
90 postcolonial and specifically South Asian context. In *Along the Archival Grain*, Stoler insists  
91 on reading colonial archives not just for what they say, but for how they say it—their textures,  
92 repetitions, gaps, and bureaucratic obsessions. She argues that archives are not repositories of  
93 empire; they are technologies of rule (Stoler, 2009, p. 20). Her concept of "aphasia"—the  
94 inability of the archive to speak about certain forms of suffering, even as it meticulously  
95 documents them—proves particularly useful in examining records of caste violence or Partition

96 trauma. Such events are frequently recorded not through testimonies or confessions, but  
97 through administrative shorthand, legal evasions, and numeric abstraction.

98         Stoler’s methodological contributions also prompt a treatment of the archive as a space  
99 of affect and anxiety. Bureaucracies do not simply reflect ideology—they leak, stall, and double  
100 back on themselves. Her insights encourage attention to elements often dismissed as noise:  
101 contradictory memos, missing signatures, and crossed-out entries. These are not errors—they  
102 are part of the archive’s structural logic (Stoler, 2009).

103         Antoinette Burton extends this critique by foregrounding gender and absence. She asks:  
104 who gets archived, and under what terms? Her work on colonial women’s lives, and the absence  
105 of their voices in official records, highlights parallel silences in the Indian postcolonial archive  
106 (Burton, 2005). Women abducted during Partition, for example, are logged as “cases” or  
107 “recoveries,” but their own voices are systematically excluded. The archive renders them  
108 visible only through bureaucratic categories, not through testimony.

109         Burton also emphasizes that archives are not inevitable; they are constructed. Decisions  
110 about what to save, what to discard, and what to classify as sensitive are acts of political  
111 judgment. In this sense, the archive is not just shaped by history; it actively shapes history itself  
112 (Burton, 2005).

113         Turning to postcolonial memory studies, Veena Das offers a crucial conceptual lens. In  
114 *Life and Words*, she explores how violence continues in everyday life—not only as trauma but  
115 as a mode of living (Das, 2007). Bureaucratic erasure does not end with the file; it persists in  
116 the silences of survivors and in the ways, communities internalize their own invisibility. Her  
117 emphasis on the banal, the routine, and the ordinary resonates strongly with the ways  
118 documents reduce extraordinary suffering to checkboxes or incident codes.

119           Gyanendra Pandey's *Remembering Partition* is equally significant. Partition is not  
120 treated as a resolved historical event, but rather as a site of contested memory—a space where  
121 official history and lived experience are often in conflict (Pandey, 2001). Pandey's insistence  
122 on fragmentation, that the past cannot be told in full, nor should it be, is a necessary corrective  
123 to the archive's pretensions of completeness. Archival documents, under this lens, are not  
124 definitive accounts but partial, ideologically saturated texts that reflect more about the priorities  
125 of the state than the realities they purport to capture.

126           Akhil Gupta brings the discussion back to material practices. In *Red Tape*, Gupta  
127 explores how bureaucracy functions as a form of structural violence (Gupta, 2012). Ordinary  
128 procedures like filing delays, missing documents, rejected applications become life-altering for  
129 the poor and marginalized. His analysis provides a critical vocabulary for understanding “slow  
130 violence” in bureaucratic systems: not always spectacular, but nonetheless devastating. A  
131 misfiled form might lead to eviction; the absence of a caste identifier can prevent a hate crime  
132 from being prosecuted appropriately.

133           Arjun Appadurai, in his work on the right to research and vernacular cosmopolitanism,  
134 emphasizes the political dimensions of knowledge production. He poses a fundamental  
135 question: who has the right to document, to archive, to write history? His call for “deep  
136 democracy” in knowledge production resonates with ongoing efforts in India to foster  
137 community archiving, oral history projects, and counter-documentation (Appadurai, 2006). His  
138 insights emphasize that archival access is a form of privilege, and that democratizing  
139 knowledge means not just declassifying files, but reimagining what counts as a document.

140           Together, these thinkers form the intellectual scaffolding for this research. Yet a  
141 recurring gap in the literature becomes apparent. While the colonial archive has been  
142 extensively critiqued, there is less sustained attention on how postcolonial states inherit and

143 adapt those archival logics. The focus on empire often ends in 1947. The present inquiry is  
144 concerned with what happens after.

145         How does a newly sovereign state adopt the tools of empire to build its own national  
146 memory? What ideologies justify continued surveillance of denotified tribes? Why do court  
147 records continue to erase caste? Why are Partition survivors remembered as data, not as voices?  
148 These questions emerge directly from the provocations of existing scholarship.

149         This paper does not seek to dismiss the colonial legacy. Rather, it asks how that legacy  
150 mutates under the banner of national sovereignty. The violence of the archive lies not only in  
151 what it contains but also in what it makes impossible to record (Stoler, 2009; Gupta, 2012; Das,  
152 2007).

### 153 **III. Methods and Materials**

154         This study is grounded in a triangulated methodology, drawing from archival research,  
155 critical textual analysis, and comparative historical reading. These methods were selected not  
156 only for their academic rigor but because they allow for the kind of slow, attentive reading that  
157 this topic demands. The archive rarely gives up its truths easily. Silence, misfilings, and  
158 contradictions must be read as data points rather than anomalies (Stoler, 2009).

160         The core of the research engages with government documents produced between 1947  
161 and the early 1980s. These include post-independence gazettes, internal circulars, police  
162 manuals, and Ministry of Home Affairs reports. Particular focus was placed on circulars related  
163 to surveillance and control, which frequently replicated colonial logic with minimal revision.  
164 In several instances, postcolonial orders were found to be direct reissues of British-era  
165 directives, with only the dates changed and colonial signatures removed (Gupta, 2012; Sharma,  
166 2001).

167 Court judgments also featured heavily in my research, particularly from lower courts  
168 where caste and tribal cases were heard.

169 These texts, while dense and procedurally repetitive, revealed how legal neutrality  
170 masks structural bias. What stood out was how often caste was elided in cases that community  
171 activists had identified as caste atrocities. The documents themselves became arguments—  
172 arguments suggesting that caste was not the issue, or that the crime was merely "interpersonal."

173 Census records offered another window into bureaucratic world-making. Enumeration  
174 guidelines and training manuals from the 1951 and 1961 censuses were reviewed. These  
175 records were telling—not only for what they asked (name, occupation, religion, language), but  
176 for what they ignored (caste, trauma, displacement). In some cases, enumerators were  
177 instructed not to record certain kinds of answers. It became clear that absence was being  
178 enforced at the point of data collection.

179 Refugee registration forms and property claim files from the Ministry of Relief and  
180 Rehabilitation were also reviewed. These documents were clinical, procedural, and almost  
181 entirely devoid of emotional language. Even in cases involving mass displacement, murder,  
182 and sexual violence, the archive maintained its neutral tone. Some forms were marked with  
183 phrases like "unfit for repatriation" or "status pending," attached to stories that could only be  
184 partially reconstructed.

185 These primary sources were supplemented by media reports, NGO documentation, and  
186 community testimony published in secondary literature. This research engaged deeply with  
187 archives compiled by activist organizations, oral history collectives, and independent scholars  
188 working outside formal academic institutions. These community-driven sources added crucial  
189 complexity to the state's narrative and provided alternative frameworks for interpreting its  
190 omissions.

191           Archival access itself became a site of investigation. At the National Archives of India,  
192 gatekeeping occurred in both expected and unexpected ways. Some documents were simply  
193 not listed; others were labeled as “not available for consultation.” In one case, a file was  
194 reported as “misplaced,” yet excerpts from it later appeared in a published book by a  
195 government-aligned historian. This inconsistency of access was not random—it reinforced the  
196 state’s control over historical narrative.

197           The research approach was shaped by Ann Stoler’s insistence on reading along the  
198 archival grain, as well as Antoinette Burton’s focus on what the archive structurally cannot  
199 contain. Particular attention was paid to language, tone, handwriting, and marginal notes. A  
200 smudged signature, a redacted sentence, or a handwritten correction often revealed more than  
201 the document’s official content.

202           Comparative methods were also employed, placing colonial-era policies alongside  
203 postcolonial ones. This proved especially effective in tracing the afterlife of the Criminal Tribes  
204 Act. What emerged were not ruptures, but echoes—surveillance continued, labels persisted,  
205 and forms changed only cosmetically.

206           It is necessary to acknowledge the limitations and ethics of this work. This research was  
207 conducted from a position of institutional access, English-language fluency, and support from  
208 academic libraries were privileges that directly shaped what could be seen, analyzed,  
and  
209 interpreted. Even as the project critiques archival systems, it remains dependent on their  
210 structures.

211           At the same time, several methodological challenges constrained this work. Key archival files,  
212 particularly those relating to ongoing legal cases, were withheld under “confidential”  
213 classifications or labeled as “pending review” with no release date. Some collections, especially  
214 district-level court archives, contained incomplete case bundles where evidentiary sections were  
215 missing, pages were misfiled, or documents were damaged beyond legibility. In other instances,  
216 records were available only in regional languages for which no official translation existed,

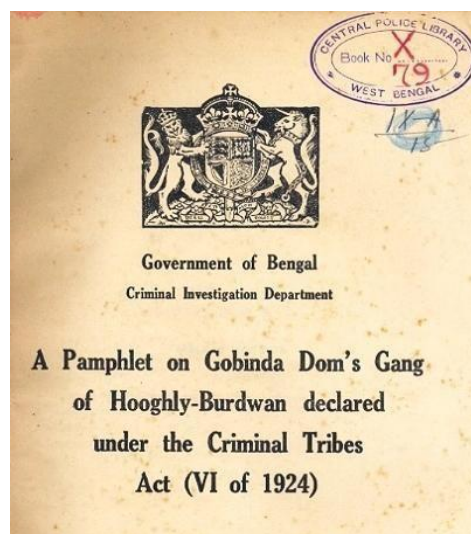
217  
218 necessitating reliance on intermediary summaries that may have introduced interpretive gaps.  
219 These barriers are not mere logistical inconveniences; they are structurally produced silences that  
220 mirror the very dynamics of omission and erasure under study.

221 The archive is not a neutral terrain. It is a contested and contingent space. And so, this  
222 methods section is not just a technical account of sources—it is a record of struggle. A struggle  
223 to see what is hidden, to name what is unspoken, and to read what the state hopes will remain  
224 unread.

### 215 **Case Study 1: The Criminal Tribes Act and Its Afterlife**

216  
217 The Criminal Tribes Act (CTA) of 1871, a product of British colonial governance,  
218 institutionalized the belief that certain communities were biologically predisposed to crime (see  
219 Figure 1). This law did not merely criminalize individuals; it criminalized lineage. Entire  
220 communities, particularly nomadic tribes, Dalits, and indigenous groups, were surveilled,  
221 registered, and confined based on inherited suspicion. The state's assumption was not that  
222 individuals committed crimes, but that crime was a hereditary trait passed down by birth. This  
223 racialized and caste-coded logic justified extreme surveillance and exclusion.

224 **Figure 1. Title page of a colonial-era pamphlet produced by the Government of Bengal**  
225 **Criminal Investigation Department, documenting “Gobinda Dom’s Gang” under the**  
226 **Criminal Tribes Act (VI of 1924).**



227  
228 *Note.* inherently criminal, institutionalizing suspicion through legal and bureaucratic language.

229 The logic of this Act persisted well into the postcolonial surveillance of denotified tribes.

230 Reprinted from the British Library archives (public domain).

231 The CTA created an entire ecosystem of surveillance (Figure 2), illustrating how  
232 communities were monitored as collectives rather than individuals. These documents were not  
233 passive reflections of a community's actions—they were tools that constructed criminality. If

234 you were born into a “notified” tribe, your criminality was presumed.

235 The paperwork didn't just document suspicion; it produced it. Police reports would  
236 reference individuals as “notorious” or “likely to offend” without evidence. The language of  
237 these registers, phrases like “known for theft,” “incorrigible,” or “requires monitoring”, was  
238 rooted less in incident and more in colonial pseudoscience and administrative convenience.

239

240

241 **Figure 2**

242

243 *Archival photograph depicting members of a denotified tribe in colonial India, shown carrying*

244 *their belongings under police observation.*<sup>244</sup>



246 *Note.* Images such as this one illustrate how surveillance and criminalization were not abstract  
247 policies but visible, everyday realities for targeted communities. Even after “denotification,”  
248 these groups remained subject to constant monitoring, reinforcing their exclusion from civic  
249 belonging. Historical photo reproduced for educational use.

250         When the CTA was repealed in 1952, the moment was celebrated as a rupture—a  
251 symbolic severing from colonial pasts. But in practice, it was closer to a cosmetic change. The  
252 same year, the independent Indian state enacted the Habitual Offenders Act (HOA). While the  
253 HOA claimed to target individual repeat offenders based on demonstrable criminal records, in  
254 effect it reproduced the very mechanisms of the CTA. Communities previously labeled  
255 “criminal” under the British continued to be monitored. Their names remained in local police  
256 records. Their presence in a town still triggered reports, raids, and arbitrary arrests.

257         A 1976 circular from the Home Department of Madhya Pradesh was uncovered during  
258 the course of this research. It advised district magistrates to “keep a close watch” on denotified  
259 tribe (DNT) settlements and to “report unusual gatherings.” The language in the memo was  
260 bureaucratic, but its implications were clear. Surveillance was not based on any reported  
261 crime—it was based on community identity. Even more troubling, the circular cited  
262 disturbances from decades prior, some stretching back to colonial times, as justification.  
263 Bureaucratic memory functioned here as prejudice encoded in official language.

264         Registers from the 1960s and 70s were also examined, many of which continued to list  
265 denotified tribes (DNTs) as “under watch.” One particularly revealing document was a 1963  
266 police ledger from Maharashtra that labeled entire hamlets as “sensitive,” based on their  
267 historical CTA status. Shockingly, that ledger was still referenced in a 1992 internal police  
268 report following a petty theft incident. No updated assessments had been made. No individual  
269 responsibility was considered. The logic was circular: they were watched because they were  
270 listed, and they were listed because they had been watched.

271           What was perhaps most disturbing was the absence of any formal mechanism for  
272 challenging or correcting these listings. Individuals misidentified as habitual offenders had no  
273 clear legal recourse. To be removed from the register often required both proof of innocence  
274 and the ability to navigate a labyrinthine legal system; barriers nearly insurmountable for  
275 marginalized communities. In one case recounted in a secondary source, a man wrongly labeled  
276 as a habitual offender spent fifteen years being denied public employment and housing until  
277 his case was taken up by a legal aid NGO. Even then, his name remained in some internal  
278 registries.

279           The implications of these bureaucratic afterlives are staggering. For denotified tribes,  
280 post-independence India did not mean liberation from surveillance. Instead, it meant the  
281 continuity of criminalization under a new national banner. Independence promised rights,  
282 dignity, and citizenship; what many DNTs received was ongoing stigmatization backed by  
283 paper.

284           Archival records related to these laws are rife with inconsistencies, euphemisms, and  
285 omissions. In some cases, local police stations created their own informal lists, unaudited and  
286 unregulated. Handwritten registers found in district archives included columns labeled  
287 “Community,” “Suspicion,” and “Known Associates”. These were not official CTA-era  
288 relics—they were created in the 1980s. The implication was clear: the mindset had outlived the  
289 law.

290           Equally significant is what’s missing from the archive. The voices of DNTs, how they  
291 understood this surveillance, how it shaped their lives, are virtually absent. Very few  
292 testimonies have been formally recorded or archived. When DNTs appear in the record, they  
293 do so as suspects, subjects of surveillance, or beneficiaries of “rehabilitation schemes”, never  
294 as narrators of their own experience. Their legal invisibility is mirrored by an archival silence.

295           This case illustrates how archival violence does not require deletion. It can operate  
296 through retention—keeping alive the traces of a stigma no law has officially endorsed. The

297 repetition of outdated records, the bureaucratic recycling of colonial language, and the absence  
298 of corrective infrastructure all serve to sustain a state of inherited criminality. Archival  
299 continuity here is not about memory; it is about power.

300         What does it mean for a community to be remembered only as a threat? What kind of  
301 citizenship is possible when the paperwork of the state refuses to forget your supposed  
302 deviance? These are not rhetorical questions; they are the lived reality of many denotified tribes  
303 in India. Their status may have changed in law, but in the files, in the ledgers, and in the minds  
304 of officials, they remain suspect.

305         In sum, the afterlife of the CTA is a testament to how bureaucratic structures outlive  
306 their formal repeal. The HOA may not name communities, but the communities know they are  
307 still targeted. The archive has not cleared them; it has continued to indict them. As long as these  
308 records persist, unexamined, unchallenged, the spectre of the CTA remains very much alive.  
309 This persistent surveillance was not an isolated legacy but echoed across other state archives,  
310 including those that managed mass displacement and violence during Partition.

### 309 **Case Study 2: Partition Archives and the State's Silences**

311         Partition produced one of the largest forced migrations in human history, accompanied  
312 by staggering violence, the scope of which continues to resist full representation. Millions were  
313 uprooted from their homes, thousands were killed, and women across religious and regional  
314 boundaries were abducted, raped, or forced into displacement. And yet, the Indian state's  
315 documentation of this trauma was bureaucratic to the point of dehumanization.

317         A review of state-generated refugee resettlement forms, ration card applications, and  
318 claim files for lost property revealed that the archive spoke in spreadsheets, not stories. (see  
319 Figure 3). It preserved the logistics of nation-building but suppressed the human cost. Each  
320 document was a ledger of absence, what was lost, what was claimed, but never who was lost,  
321 or how. This was not accidental. It was a bureaucratic strategy that enabled the Indian state to

322 present the Partition as a challenge that was administratively managed, rather than morally  
 323 catastrophic.

324 **Figure 3**

325 *Partition-era refugee identification document issued by the Government of India during*  
 326 *resettlement efforts.*

327

328  
 329 *Note.* This document demonstrates how displacement was bureaucratically managed through  
 330 standardized forms. Details such as age, “peculiarities,” and birthplace were recorded, while  
 331 refugees’ own narratives of loss and trauma were excluded. The administrative language  
 332 reduced lived experience to a set of categories, reflecting the archive’s role in shaping whose  
 333 stories were recognized. Obtained from the Government of India, Ministry of Rehabilitation.

334 One archival file listed abducted women according to region and religion, but provided  
 335 no names—only numbers. Even the categories used were administrative: “recovered,” “non-  
 336 returned,” “refused repatriation.” These terms rendered human beings into bureaucratic  
 337 artifacts. A woman who had been abducted and later refused to return to her natal home was  
 338 marked as “problematic” or “compromised.” The state’s concern was sovereignty, not  
 339 subjectivity. Internal memos from the period questioned whether certain women “still held  
 340 patriotic allegiance,” as if trauma could be indexed by national loyalty.

341 Muslim refugees who fled to Pakistan were rarely included in these narratives—except

342 as “evacuees.” This term was legalistic and cold, devoid of the political and emotional realities  
343 of forced migration. The archive does not mourn them; it manages their departure. And Dalit  
344 survivors of Partition are almost entirely missing from the bureaucratic record. Though caste  
345 would have shaped every dimension of their flight, access to transport, reception in camps,  
346 treatment by relief officers, it is mentioned only when it justified exclusion. One resettlement  
347 form documented the denial of agricultural land to a Dalit family on the grounds of their  
348 “unsuitability for cultivation.” Caste was invoked only as a disqualifier, never as a form of  
349 compounded vulnerability.

350         Gendered erasure was even more pronounced. The state treated women not as subjects  
351 of violence but as symbols of national honor. Recovery efforts—largely coordinated by male  
352 bureaucrats and police—focused on restoring women to their “rightful” communities, often  
353 against their will. In several documented cases, women who had remarried or begun new lives  
354 were forcibly returned to natal homes that subsequently rejected them.

355         A particularly jarring document from 1948, a note from the Ministry of Relief and  
356 Rehabilitation, stated: “The return of women must proceed regardless of expressed  
357 unwillingness, as the integrity of the state depends on recovery statistics.” That single sentence  
358 collapsed any illusion that the archive was apolitical. It revealed the role of documentation in  
359 converting trauma into metrics. A woman’s consent became irrelevant if her return would  
360 contribute to the numerical logic of state redemption.

361         This tendency extended to property claims as well. Families filing for compensation  
362 had to list property lost ‘in precise monetary terms’ (Figure 4), reinforcing the archival focus  
363 on material over emotional loss. There were no forms for grief, or trauma, or lost community.  
364 Only what could be valued in rupees could be recorded. In one case, a man who had witnessed  
365 the massacre of his family tried to submit a written narrative along with his claim. It was  
366 returned to him, marked “not relevant to application process.”

367 **Figure 4**

368 *Resettlement certificate issued by the Government of East Punjab documenting family*  
 369 *composition and relocation status after Partition.*

370

RESETTLEMENT CARD, (REHABILITATION) PUNJAB.

District... Simla

Registration Office No... Simla

Index No... 1143

1. Name of head of family... Kishori Lal

2. Details of family members... 3

Men-adults	Women-adults	Children (below 15 years)	Infants.
1	1	1	

3. Other particulars, if necessary... New Cap, Simla, East Punjab

Date... 28.7.48

Place... Simla, E.P.

Signature of Attesting Authority... [Signature]

Designation... [Signature]

memo No.  
Dated  
Sub:  
Resident  
Faridkot  
You

371

372 *Note.* This form illustrates how refugee identity and claims to land were reduced to  
 373 bureaucratic entries, leaving little space for personal testimony or the trauma of displacement.  
 374 The sparse fields and official language exemplify how administrative records transformed  
 375 complex human experiences into simplified data points. Obtained from the National Archives of  
 376 India, Bengal Partition Records.  
 377

378 This silence served a function. It allowed the postcolonial state to project competence,  
 379 control, and humanitarian success. Bureaucracy sanitized the horror of Partition. The trauma  
 380 of mass displacement and communal slaughter was repackaged as logistical efficiency; camp  
 381 statistics, food rations, train schedules. In the national archive, the messiness of human  
 382 suffering is overwritten by the order of forms and columns.

383 One of the more subtle yet devastating aspects of this silence is how it shaped future  
 384 memory. For decades, Partition survivors relied on oral histories, family lore, or community  
 385 archives to remember. The state's archive made no space for rage or mourning. It created an  
 386 official silence that was difficult to contest because it was so procedural. A "missing person's

387 form” might record a name, but not how they went missing, or what efforts were made to  
388 search. Women whose bodies were never recovered were listed as “untraceable”, a bureaucratic  
389 disappearance.

390         The silences in the Partition archive also ripple outward. They affect the kinds of  
391 histories that can be written, the kinds of reparations that can be imagined. How do you  
392 advocate for redress when the archive does not record your suffering? How do you claim justice  
393 when the forms never asked for your name?

394         Even in contemporary debates about Partition memory, these absences persist. Most  
395 national commemorations focus on “independence” rather than “division.” Memorials, when  
396 they exist, often reproduce sanitized narratives. The bureaucratic archive becomes not just a  
397 repository of state priorities but a barrier to alternative histories. Scholars and activists who  
398 seek to document gendered, caste-based, or minority experiences of Partition must work  
399 around, rather than within, the state archive.

400         In this way, the Partition archive performs a double violence. It erases the marginalized  
401 in its omissions and then legitimizes that erasure through its apparent neutrality. The file, the  
402 form, the spreadsheet all claim objectivity. But their exclusions are deeply political.

403         The archive, then, is not just incomplete, it is structured to be incomplete. It is not just  
404 silent; it is designed to silence. And until we grapple with that structure, the memory of Partition  
405 will remain fractured, not because people forgot, but because the state never allowed them to  
406 fully remember.

407         As with the Partition archive, bureaucratic reductionism continues in the legal archive, where  
408 the elision of caste recasts systemic violence as individual pathology.

409

### 410 **Case Study 3: Caste Atrocities and the Legal Archive**

411         Among all areas examined, the erasure of caste violence from the legal archive emerged  
412 as the most contemporary and perhaps the most corrosively persistent. While the Criminal  
413

414 Tribes Act and the Partition recovery regime are often discussed as past chapters in India's  
415 bureaucratic history, the silencing of caste atrocity through legal formalism is ongoing. Here,  
416 the violence of the archive lies not in misrepresentation, but in omission—in what it refuses to  
417 name, record, or contextualize.

418         Police First Information Reports (FIRs) and court judgments in cases of caste-based  
419 violence routinely omit references to caste, even when it is the organizing principle of the  
420 violence itself. Across readings of cases from Uttar Pradesh, Maharashtra, and Madhya  
421 Pradesh, sanitized descriptions of lynchings, rapes, and arson frequently appeared as “personal  
422 disputes” or “property disagreements.” Assaults were minimized as “group scuffles.” Murders  
423 became “unexplained deaths.” The effect is chilling: the legal archive presents a country where  
424 caste violence does not exist.

425         Consider the 2006 Khairlanji massacre, a widely publicized case of caste atrocity in  
426 Maharashtra, in which members of the Bhotmange family, a Dalit agricultural household, were  
427 targeted by upper-caste villagers following a dispute over land boundaries and long-standing  
428 caste hostility. On September 29, 2006, Surekha Bhotmange and her children were stripped,  
429 paraded, beaten, raped, and murdered by a mob of men from the dominant caste. The brutality  
430 sparked national outrage and protests by Dalit rights groups. Yet the initial police report framed  
431 the killings as a revenge attack over land, making no mention of caste. Court documents  
432 emphasized the lack of “clear caste animus” and focused on inconsistencies in witness  
433 statements.

434         This case, preserved in the records of a small district court in Uttar Pradesh, involved  
435 the public lynching of a Dalit farm laborer on the main street of the village in front of dozens of  
436 witnesses. Local oral histories link the attack to an earlier dispute over access to a communal  
437 well, a site where Dalits had long been denied entry by upper-caste landlords. Usual media  
438 investigations and Dalit activists eventually forced a conversation about caste, but even

439 then, the official record remained evasive. The judgment relied heavily on procedural gaps  
440 and failed to apply the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act.

441 This is not an anomaly. A 1998 case from a district archive documented the lynching of  
442 a Dalit man in broad daylight in a village known for caste tensions. The FIR stated the cause  
443 of death as “injuries sustained during a community altercation.” The accused were acquitted  
444 on grounds of insufficient evidence of caste-based motive. The judgment described them as  
445 “men of good repute” and noted the “absence of prior enmity.” The fact that they were upper-  
446 caste landlords and the victim a Dalit laborer was not mentioned once in the final ruling.

447 What emerges from these records is a legal structure that not only fails to name caste  
448 but actively discourages its naming. Police officers often do not include caste identifiers in  
449 FIRs unless explicitly instructed. Judicial proceedings prioritize procedural correctness over  
450 social context. Prosecutors may avoid arguing caste angles if they fear it will complicate the  
451 case. And defense lawyers routinely exploit the lack of explicit documentation to frame the  
452 violence as non-discriminatory. As a result, caste atrocity becomes bureaucratically unprovable  
453 and therefore legally non-existent.

454 The case, heard in a trial court in Madhya Pradesh, involved a 19-year-old Dalit woman  
455 who testified that she had been abducted and assaulted by three men from the dominant caste.  
456 The attack was reported under the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of  
457 Atrocities) Act as well as sections of the Indian Penal Code relating to sexual violence.

458 It is also evident that language often functions as a shield—protecting institutions from  
459 accountability by reframing structural violence as neutral or routine. Words like “village  
460 tension,” “grievance,” or “long-standing rivalry” are used to flatten structural hierarchies into  
461 interpersonal disputes. Bureaucratic neutrality in this context is not just cowardice; it is  
462 complicity. It transforms systemic violence into legal ambiguity.

463 Another troubling trend is how evidence itself is filtered. Testimonies from Dalit

464 survivors or witnesses are often treated as unreliable. In multiple cases, judgments questioned  
465 the “veracity” of Dalit voices due to supposed inconsistencies, even when upper-caste  
466 witnesses offered contradictory accounts. One 2011 case involved the dismissal of a Dalit  
467 woman’s testimony of gang rape, in a rural district in Haryana, on the grounds that she  
468 “did not appear adequately traumatized.” The court ruled that her emotional expression was  
469 “incongruent with the claimed severity of the event.” That phrase, “incongruent with severity”,  
470 stands as a chilling example of how the state not only disbelieves marginalized voices but  
471 pathologizes their survival.

472         This epistemic violence extends to record-keeping. In several district court archives,  
473 caste atrocity case files were found to be missing, incomplete, or labeled as “disposed” without  
474 accessible judgments.

475         Some were inexplicably absent. Others were labelled “disposed” without accessible  
476 judgments. Even when files were retrievable, many were incomplete. Witness statements were  
477 summarized rather than quoted, stripping them of nuance and specificity. Police evidence logs  
478 were empty. In one 2003 case from Madhya Pradesh, the entire evidentiary section was  
479 redacted “pending appeal”, a case that had never been appealed.

480         The legal archive, then, performs a dual function: it documents law, but also defines  
481 what counts as legible violence. When caste is erased, what remains is a narrative of random  
482 disorder. This not only denies justice in the present; it distorts history for the future. Researchers  
483 reading these files decades from now will find sanitized violence, procedural euphemism, and  
484 bureaucratic neutrality. They will not find the realities that communities live with daily.

485         Equally troubling is how caste atrocity law itself is archived. The Prevention of  
486 Atrocities Act, passed in 1989 and amended in 2015, was designed to address the unique nature  
487 of caste violence. But its application is inconsistent, and its archive sparse. The very law meant  
488 to counteract caste injustice is often missing from case documentation. I searched for cases  
489 where the Act had been applied and found that even when it was invoked, it was rarely upheld.

490 Charges were diluted, sections dropped, or procedural loopholes exploited to avoid conviction.

491         This legal undermining extends into the discourse around “false cases.” Dominant caste  
492 media narratives often portray Dalit complainants as misusing the Act. This perception, though  
493 unsubstantiated at scale, influences police, judges, and even legal aid providers. As a result,  
494 fewer victims come forward. The archive begins to reflect this chilling effect—not as a lack of  
495 violence, but as a lack of reporting. Bureaucracy reinterprets this silence as proof that caste  
496 violence is declining.

497         This bureaucratic loop, where absence of data becomes absence of reality, is perhaps  
498 the most insidious feature of the legal archive. It privileges official speech and punishes non-  
499 conformity. It forgets structurally and remembers selectively. And in doing so, it constructs a  
500 nation where caste violence appears episodic, rather than endemic.

501         The caste archive is a site of profound distortion. It flattens oppression into incident,  
502 reduces community trauma to legal mischief, and transforms systemic injustice into statistical  
503 error. The damage it does is cumulative and generational. It affects who gets legal aid, whose  
504 history is written, and whose suffering is eligible for redress.

505         In closing, this case study reveals that the violence of the archive is not just in what is  
506 erased—but in what is allowed to remain. Sanitized stories. Discredited voices. Legal verdicts  
507 that speak in the language of neutrality while legitimizing hierarchy. If justice is memory  
508 institutionalized, then the legal archive in India remains a deeply unjust terrain.

509 Taken together with the cases of surveillance and Partition, the legal archive reveals a  
510 consistent logic of erasure—where the state reclassifies structural violence as individual  
511 deviation, and in doing so, maintains the fiction of neutrality. These case studies are not  
512 isolated anomalies, but manifestations of a bureaucratic system built to obscure the very  
513 realities it claims to record.

514 **IV. Discussion**

515           What ties these three case studies together is the archive's deep complicity that lies  
516 in violence. This violence does not arrive through dramatic proclamations or overt propaganda.  
517 It works through slow, strategic silence.

518  
519           Across contexts, from the surveillance of denotified tribes, to the bureaucratization of  
520 Partition trauma, to the erasure of caste atrocities, the archive emerges as a machine of  
521 selective memory, not a neutral repository. It documents and records, but it also omits and  
522 forecasts, turning erasure into an active project carried out through the everyday instruments of  
523 statecraft: forms, files, circulars, and judicial language.

524           Drawing on Akhil Gupta's concept of "bureaucratic violence," we begin to understand  
525 how the mechanics of administration become tools of harm. They shape visibility and  
526 define who can be seen, who can be heard, and whose pain is deemed admissible. Bureaucracy  
527 is not merely slow. It strategically defines the borders of legibility. In that  
528 sense, the archive functions not as a mirror of reality, but as a gatekeeper, a border guard  
529 deciding which truths may cross into national memory. Bureaucracy is not merely slow; it is  
530 calibrated. It strategically defines the borders of legibility. In that sense, the archive functions  
531 not as a mirror of reality, but as a gatekeeper, a border guard deciding which truths get to  
532 cross into national memory.

533           Consider how caste, for instance, is omitted from police reports and court judgments.  
534 That omission is not a clerical oversight; it is a choice shaped by legal conventions, political  
535 pressures, and social hierarchies. Similarly, the classification of abducted women during  
536 Partition as "recovered" or "refused repatriation" was not merely shorthand; it was a way of  
537 controlling the narrative of national dignity. In the case of denotified tribes, records retain the  
538 vocabulary of suspicion long after the law has changed. The paper trail outlives the reform.

539           This is what makes the archive a particularly dangerous site of epistemic violence: it

540 makes its exclusions look like objectivity. A missing testimony is never marked as “excluded”  
541 or “denied.” It simply vanishes. And the archive continues, uninterrupted, presenting a version  
542 of history that seems comprehensive because it is bound, classified, and stamped.

543         The archive, then, is not just about memory. It is a moral claim. It helps define the  
544 boundaries of justice, of legitimacy, and of national belonging. Who gets remembered, and  
545 how, is not a trivial issue. It is a foundational one. Archives are not just about what happened;  
546 they’re about who counts. And when the state refuses to record a people’s suffering, it is not  
547 merely dismissing their history; it is challenging their very claim to citizenship.

548         This insight has implications far beyond the Indian context. Across the postcolonial  
549 world, newly independent states inherited not just political systems but epistemic infrastructures.  
550 The methods of surveillance, documentation, and control honed under colonial rule did not  
551 disappear in 1947, 1957, or 1960. They were adopted, rebranded, and embedded in the fabric  
552 of governance. The bureaucratic languages of “service,” “welfare,” “rehabilitation,” and  
553 “development” often carry within them the residual logics of domination. A ration card can be  
554 both a lifeline and a leash.

555         In this light, archives must be treated not as neutral storehouses of knowledge, but as  
556 terrains of struggle. The question must be asked: Who built this archive? For whom was it  
557 intended? What kinds of questions can it answer, and which ones has it been designed to evade?  
558 Silence in the archive is never just a gap; it is the result of labor, deliberate, structured, and  
559 strategic.

560 Reading the archive “against the grain,” as suggested by scholars like Ann Stoler, means  
561 treating its contradictions, silences, and absences as data. It also means being reflexive about  
562 one’s own position as a reader. The ability to access certain files, quote from court judgments,  
563 and analyze policy documents constitutes a form of institutional privilege. That privilege stands  
564 in tension with the stories this research seeks to surface—stories that the state has long worked  
565 to erase.

566 Counter-archives are crucial in this context. Oral histories, community testimonies,  
567 grassroots legal documentation, and even folklore offer challenges to the state's monopoly on  
568 memory. These alternative repositories are not simply emotional or anecdotal; they are  
569 epistemologies in their own right. They challenge the form, tone, and logic of state  
570 documentation. They allow for multiplicity, ambiguity, contradiction—things the state archive  
571 struggles to accommodate.

572 However, even counter-archives are not without risk. As they gain visibility, they too  
573 become subject to co-optation, regulation, and dismissal. What begins as a radical intervention  
574 can be folded into a bureaucratic system that absorbs dissent without changing its structure.  
575 That is why a decolonial archival politics must be more than additive. It cannot simply demand  
576 “more representation” within existing systems. It must demand new systems entirely; ones built  
577 on consent, reciprocity, and accountability.

578 To envision the archive as a site of justice, rather than domination, we must first  
579 acknowledge the violence that has been done in its name. That means tracing not just the  
580 content of state records, but their form: who they name, how they classify, what they  
581 standardize, and what they leave blank. It means refusing to treat silence as a neutral absence.  
582 Silence is a structure, and it has authors.

583 This recognition also requires us to think politically about methodology. To read an  
584 archive is to enter into a relationship with state power; sometimes adversarial, sometimes  
585 complicit. The research process, triangulating official records with community sources,  
586 analyzing omissions alongside inclusions, and resisting easy coherence, was shaped by that  
587 political imperative. The archive does not exist outside politics. Research does not exist outside  
588 power.

589 Ultimately, the question is not simply how we use the archive but how we change it.  
590 What would it mean to build an archive that begins with those who were never meant to be

591 remembered? What would it mean to treat oral testimony not as evidence to be verified against  
592 a document, but as a document in its own right? What if grief, uncertainty, and ambiguity were  
593 not obstacles to truth, but forms of truth themselves?

594           These are not rhetorical provocations. They are methodological mandates. If we are to  
595 create a more just historical record, and by extension, a more just society, we must rethink what  
596 we ask of archives. We must move beyond the fantasy of neutrality, and toward a practice of  
597 accountability.

598           Because in the end, the archive does not just remember. It decides what is forgettable.  
599 And that decision, more than any fact it contains, is what shapes the world we inherit.

## 600 **V. Conclusion**

601           This research began with a question about memory and concludes with a demand for  
602 accountability. The Indian state's archives are not passive repositories of history. They are sites  
603 where history is legislated, identity is bureaucratized, and silence is systematized. These  
604 archives do not merely preserve the past. They shape it, curate it, and in doing so, obscure and  
605 erase lives that do not fit the official script.

606           Across three case studies, this paper has demonstrated that the postcolonial Indian  
607 archive functions as an instrument of epistemic and political violence. In the surveillance of  
608 denotified tribes, colonial logics of suspicion persisted long after independence, embedded in  
609 the banal language of postcolonial circulars and registries.

610           The archive, in this context, did not reflect reality, it created criminality through  
611 repetition, categorization, and refusal to forget. In the case of Partition, the trauma of mass  
612 displacement and violence was bureaucratically managed into silence. Forms and files reduced  
613 human suffering to statistics. Women were documented as "cases," not individuals. Grief was  
614 standardized; dissent erased. And in the legal archive, caste atrocities are filtered through a  
615 language of neutrality that renders structural violence unrecognizable. Murder becomes a

616 “dispute,” and rape a “misunderstanding.” These records do not tell the truth. They tell the  
617 state’s version of what truth is allowed to look like.

618         Together, these examples illustrate a broader argument: the archive does not merely  
619 document power; it performs it. Through paperwork, legalese, omission, and euphemism, the  
620 archive delineates whose lives are worthy of preservation and whose can be forgotten without  
621 consequence. It is not the absence of documentation that is most harmful—but the illusion of  
622 completeness that bad documentation creates. The file is stamped, the form is filled, and the  
623 wound is sealed over.

624         This insight forces a rethinking of some of the most basic assumptions in historiography  
625 and legal studies. We often treat archives as the foundation of knowledge, the starting point for  
626 inquiry. But what happens when the foundation is corrupted by exclusion? When the very  
627 structure of record-keeping is designed to fail certain people? What is needed, then, is not just  
628 a critical reading of archival content, but a critique of archival form. What categories are  
629 available? What is unaskable within the language of the state? What does not fit into a field, a  
630 checkbox, a court ruling?

631         Society must also grapple with the real-world implications of archival violence. These  
632 are not just abstract concerns. When caste is omitted from legal records, it affects sentencing  
633 and acquittal. When refugee trauma is undocumented, it affects compensation and memory.  
634 When a denotified tribe remains on a police list decades after legal exoneration, it affects  
635 livelihoods, safety, and social inclusion. The archive is not inert. It has teeth.

636         And so, the call to action is threefold. First, it is essential to support and legitimize  
637 counter-archives. Oral histories, community testimonies, non-state records, and activist  
638 documentation should be recognized not as supplemental, but as vital sources. These are not  
639 footnotes to the “real” archive. They are correctives that carry the authority of lived  
640 experience.

641           Second, institutional record-keeping practices must be reformed. This includes funding  
642 community-led documentation projects, declassifying bureaucratic records, and establishing  
643 protocols for ethical representation. Legal documents must be reimagined, census forms  
644 revised in their approach to identity, and police FIRs drafted with a commitment to inclusion  
645 and accuracy. The state must be held accountable not only for what it records, but also for what  
646 it systematically erases.

647           Third, the discourse around archives in public life requires transformation. Archivists  
648 must be understood not simply as custodians of documents, but as gatekeepers of justice.  
649 Researchers must be recognized not as neutral observers, but as participants in the politics of  
650 memory.

651           This research does not claim to be exhaustive. There are silences that remain beyond  
652 the reach of documentation. But that, too, is the point. The limits of what can be known through  
653 the archive are not accidents; they are design features. The question is not whether the archive  
654 is biased. It is how that bias functions, whom it serves, and what we will do in response.

655           If the archive has been a site of violence, it can also become a site of repair—but only  
656 if there is a collective willingness to confront what it was built to conceal. That confrontation  
657 requires courage, creativity, and solidarity. It requires us to ask: Whose memory matters? Who  
658 gets to decide? And what kind of future can we build if we refuse to inherit an erasure?

659           In the end, this is not just a call for better records. It is a call for a better politics of  
660 remembering. Because memory is not just about the past—it decides who gets to be part of the  
661 future.

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